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ABSTRACT

A study was designed to systematically gather subjective opinions from superintendents, principals, and teachers regarding the efficacy of educational reforms instituted in Alberta, B.C., during the 1990s. Data were obtained through a questionnaire consisting of 10 statements with which respondents could either strongly agree, agree, have no opinion, disagree, or disagree strongly; and 5 general questions requiring a subjective written answer. The statements pertained to whether reform has led to increased accountability for teachers and principals; improved quality of service to students; an increase of local control; improvement in student learning; improved classroom teaching practices; increased public confidence; a democratically run educational system; affordable and high-quality public education; solutions for most problems prior to 1993; and a change of condition in the respondent's school or jurisdiction. Of the 1,482 questionnaires distributed, 301 teachers, 200 principals, and 40 superintendents responded. The results support the overall conclusion that, according to the collective majority, reforms have not improved the system. After interpreting the data, it is concluded that new relationships and goals are needed to bring about a healthy, effective, and cooperative public education system in Alberta. (Contains 22 references and a sample questionnaire.) (RIB)

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THE IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL REFORMS ON THE OPERATIONS OF ALBERTA'S PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM: A COMPARISON OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF SUPERINTENDENTS, PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS

by

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November 6, 1998

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THE IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL REFORMS ON THE OPERATIONS OF ALBERTA'S PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM: A COMPARISON OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF SUPERINTENDENTS, PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS

INTRODUCTION

In 1994 the Alberta government introduced an aggressive agenda of educational reform that led to amalgamations of school boards, centralization of taxation powers for the funding of public education, a 5% salary rollback for all teachers and administrators, dramatic downsizing of the Ministry of Education and the introduction, where it was not already in place, of a model of site-based management and decision-making for schools. In 1995, Education Minister H. C. Jonson wrote:

> The reduction in the number of school boards, the redefinition of roles and responsibilities in education, the legislation related to school councils, the introduction of Charter Schools, the development of a new funding framework for school boards and a new accountability framework for the education system have one common objective: the best possible education for all Alberta students. (Meeting The Challenge II 1995, p. 2)

Over the last five years Alberta Education has produced a series of documents (including such titles as Meeting The Challenge I-IV, Results Reports on Three-Year Business Plans for Education, and First Things First.... Our Children) that have attempted to show, among other things, levels of achievement of evolving system goals and levels of satisfaction different groups of Albertans report with the effects of reforms.

Most often these different groups have comprised representatives of parents, the public at large, and high school students (see, for example, McEwan, 1998).

However, very little information has been gathered in any systematic way from representatives of some other groups of people who have been most affected by educational reforms and who may be in the most advantageous position to offer some accurate assessments of the extent to which planned reforms have been implemented and have had an impact on the education system itself. In an effort to address this possible oversight, researchers from The University of Lethbridge distributed questionnaires to large samples of the province's principals, teachers, and superintendents. Participants were asked to respond to a set of statements using a 5-point scale (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree) and to answer an additional set of questions about the impact of educational reform on the operations of Alberta's public schools. Many of the statements and questions that appeared in these questionnaires were taken directly from Ministry documents or from public statements made by representatives of the government. Some were developed in response to concerns raised by public education stakeholders such as school trustees and school superintendents. A few resulted from concerns raised by principals and teachers. Of the 62 questionnaires distributed to superintendents in March, 1998, 40 were completed, a return rate of 64.5%. Two hundred principals out of a random sample of 420 completed their questionnaires in April, 1998 for a return rate of approximately 47.5%. Of the random sample of one thousand teachers who received their questionnaires in June 1998, 301 returned them, a rate of 30%.

RELATED LITERATURE

In commenting upon the character of comprehensive educational reform initiatives, of which Alberta's current effort is just one of many attempted in North America in the last decade, Hatch (1998) concludes that they tend not to achieve their desired goals because they lack coordination, an unambiguous rationale for change, common vision and effective improvement processes. In part, Hatch echoes Fullan's (1991) observation that the sorts of reforms that have promoted such things as school-based decision making, reforms he labels as "restructuring," may have altered governance procedures but have not affected the teaching-learning core of the schools into which they have been introduced (p. 210). Fullan (1998) argues that restructuring bears no direct relationship to improvements in teaching and learning, focussing as it does on such changes in the formal structure of schooling as organization, timetables and roles. Instead, he says, it is reculturing that makes a difference in teaching and learning, when changes in the norms, values, incentives, skills, and relationships in the organization foster a different way for people to work together.

This emphasis on the nature of change is at the heart of many educators' concerns about the purposes of reform initiatives. Shields and Knapp (1997) contend that the ultimate proof of the value of successful reforms should be what students take away from their school experiences. On the surface, this conclusion appears to be consistent with the spirit of Education Minister Jonson's statement, referred to in the introduction of this paper, which implies that the overarching goal of Alberta's reforms is "the best possible education for all Alberta students." However, Fullan's (1998) explanation of the change process would suggest that it may be too hopeful of the Alberta government to anticipate

that qualitative improvements in teaching and learning will result from the kinds of reforms it has initiated.

Conley (1997) proposes that the reforms of the 1990s in North America, as opposed to those of other eras, seem to place stronger emphasize on accountability for reasons that are economic and societal, not clearly educational. Conley suggests this may help explain why there is such conflict between, say, the perceptions of the business community and the perceptions of educators with respect to the value each group places on the kinds of reforms that have been proposed. It may also help to explain why measures of student outcomes other than test scores, a big issue with many educators, may not even be germane to policy-makers' perceptions of whether or not reforms have been successful. Conley's analysis adds weight to his contention that educators' concerns about educational reform are less influential now than they were in the periods of intensive educator activism in the 1960s and 1970s. He says, "the most powerful and sustained calls for change in education will likely come from outside the education profession" (p. 29).

His understanding of the politics of educational reform in the 1990s suggests that those educators and authors whose best efforts show compelling reasons why reforms will fail, should fail, or have failed may be fighting a losing battle against policy-makers who seem to have closed their ears to the opinions and advice of members of the education profession. For example, who among policy-makers in Alberta would want to hear a leading Alberta superintendent declare:

> The major restructuring changes mandated by the Province of Alberta have not fundamentally affected the learning experiences of students.

> The classroom has been protected, not changed. Little systemic change has occurred in schools. Alberta' restructuring efforts have increased the pressures on school personnel without providing school personnel the opportunities to significantly change the lived curriculum - the learning experiences of students? (Lynn, 1998)

Similarly, in the present political climate, why would policy-makers worry that principals are being inadequately prepared to take on the new roles and responsibilities reforms demand of them (Coleman & Larocque, 1993), or that there is evidence of a growing gap between so-called have and have-not schools (see, for example, Wylie, 1995; Aitken, Aitken, Townsend, & Warnica, 1996), or that a majority of Alberta's principals felt that the overall quality of Alberta's schools was worse in 1996 than it was in 1992 (Townsend, Penton, Aitken, & Gowans, 1997)? The perceived self-interest of those raising the concerns may render the message inaudible to policy-makers and critics whose understanding of the realities of public education identifies many educators as part of the problem that needs to be solved.

In Alberta, since 1994, evidence of successful implementation of educational reforms has been compiled chiefly by the provincial ministry, Alberta Education, in documents such as The Second Annual Results Report (September, 1996); Meeting The Challenge: Key Accomplishments in Education 1994/95 to 1996/97; Measuring Up (June, 1996); and Meeting The Challenge IV: Detailed Three-Year Plan for Education in Alberta 1997/1998 - 1999/2000. According to McEwan (1998) telephone surveys of parents, high school students, members of the public and, in some cases, beginning teachers, have provided much of the data upon which such evidence has been based. As

well, students' results on provincial achievement tests administered in grades 3, 6 and 9, and on grade 12 diploma exams, have been linked to the evidence of reforms' effects, as have students' scores on international Math and Science Exams, while the contents of three year education plans prepared by each school and jurisdiction have been used to show evidence of change and improvement. McEwan explains how data gathered in previous years is now being used to generate "satisfaction targets" for 1999 in six areas, including overall quality of education, high school graduates' knowledge and skills to get a job and their preparation for post secondary studies, and value for public funds spent on education.

There is much in this data-gathering and documentation to confirm Conley's (1997) contention that two significant trends in school reform, decentralized decision making and increased demands for accountability, appear to be on a collision course. For Alberta Education, that could mean abandonment of the notion that there are simple ways by which to increase or judge school success but, as Conley observes, policy-makers do not have a very good track record of attending to such subtleties. Alternatively, it might mean that the kinds of changes that Alberta's reform agenda will produce in the end will be those requiring little change in culture and practice, those that can be accommodated through compliance.

Burger (1998) is an Alberta researcher whose study of the implementation of an accountability framework in one school jurisdiction provides evidence of just how much effort is required to bring one small group of schools into compliance with the provincial accountability policy mandating school-level reporting. He concludes that "substantive provincial strategies will continue to be required to support comprehensive

implementation of the accountability policy, unfortunately at a time when downsizing has apparently compromised the capacity of the Ministry to effect and maintain supportive links with the field" (p. 19). Burger's comments are similar to conclusions Jones and Whitford (1997) draw in their critique of Kentucky's accountability model. They suggest what is needed is a movement away from bureaucratic control toward professional accountability, with an emphasis on professional commitment, not just compliance, using a more inclusive and collaborative accountability model.

Probably nowhere in Alberta has the clash of government-mandated reform and school jurisdiction responsibility been on more public display than in Calgary. Representatives of the Calgary Board of Education (C.B.E.) have claimed that the government's centralization of the collection and redistribution of property taxes has cost their jurisdiction $123 million over three years (see, for example The Calgary Herald, April 14, 1998). A report commissioned by the provincial government and published in June, 1998 (a Collaborative Learning Community: Calgary Board of Education Review, Alberta, Education, 1998) strongly supports C.B.E. members' contentions that their "policy-based governance model is not clearly understood" (p. 9) and that their ability to provide more services to the communities they serve has been compromised by the provincial government's attempts to provide equitable access to all Alberta students while ensuring fiscal responsibility and reducing public sector spending. Moreover, the report appears to confirm that C.B.E. has been dramatically disadvantaged by the general implementation of inflexible equity measures across jurisdictions with unequal needs.

Keates (1998) notes that Alberta Education published its *Accountability in Education Policy Framework* in June, 1995, just over two years after the Government

Accountability Act was first introduced in the provincial legislature. Despite the fact that the framework was compiled after a series of "roundtable" meetings involving representatives of the government and all other educational stakeholders, and after an Implementation Team made up of M.L.A.s had held 18 information-gathering meetings across the province, the response of many educators to the government's accountability initiatives was mostly negative and resistive. Burger (1998) suggests that in order for accountability measures to be successful in achieving their goals they need first to be meaningful for those who must implement them. He contends that educators would be more responsive to a model of professional accountability that would include all key sectors in the decision- making process, and would be derived through open and honest dialogue and trust among all parties. Alberta's "roundtables" were seen by many educators as an exercise in legitimization of decisions the government had already made and, as such, would hardly conform to Burger's definition of actions more likely to engender commitment. Bosetti (personal communication, 1998) however, offers a slightly different perspective in the following remarks about Alberta's changes in funding and governance. [Dr. Reno Bosetti was Deputy Minister of Education in Alberta from 1982-1995].

> Before the province could undertake reductions in funding it first had to resolve the problem of extremely large differences in the fiscal capacities which existed among school jurisdictions. (Prior to 1994) assessment-rich jurisdictions simply could make small increases in their (local) taxes (to cover the costs of such things as contract settlements) instead of working towards more efficient operations. Assessment-poor jurisdictions, on the other hand, (were often) "forced" to make very large tax increases in order to . . . remain competitive in matters such as salary negotiations and settlements.
>
> Once accountability measures were in place they helped us, in making sure that children in all parts of the province could be given the same level

> of funding for the same quality of educational service. In turn, this also helped us in developing our ideas about choice in public education. They gave us a way of reorganizing the boundaries of school jurisdictions so that unnecessary duplication of services could be eradicated and they gave us more efficient ways of determining which school jurisdictions were meeting expectations and which ones were not.

Some reactions of educators to the impact of accountability measures have been captured in a report prepared for Alberta superintendents more than two years after reforms had been initiated (see Townsend, Penton, Aitken, & Gowans, 1997). A random sample of 163 principals, when asked to compare certain conditions in Alberta schools in 1998 with those same conditions in 1992 responded as follows:

Condition	Same	Better	Worse
Working conditions of principals	12%	10%	78%
Working conditions of teachers	14%	6%	80%
Educational Services for Students	29%	23%	48%
Overall quality of Alberta Schools	30%	17%	53%

Many of these responses appear to contradict the evidence Alberta Education has gathered in its regular surveys. For example, The Third Annual Results Report on Education, 1997 (Alberta Education, 1997) shows that 89% of parents and 97% of students were satisfied with the quality of education in school in 1997, while 86% of parents and 95% of students were satisfied with the quality of education in schools in 1996. There is irony in these figures. In their written comments many principals in the 1996 study were very concerned that the quality of work- life and job satisfaction for

them and for their teachers were clearly being negatively effected by such things as downsizing, downloading, fiscal constraint and a perceived lack of appreciation on the part of politicians, policy-makers and the public at large. Their ratings reflect the extent of their concerns. The parents and students who were contacted in telephone surveys, on the other hand, as such groups do in almost all such surveys, tended to rate their local school and its teachers quite highly on questions of satisfaction. In this juxtapositioning of opinions and numbers can be seen the government's need to show success in the implementation of reforms coming up against the principals' need to show how bad the impact of reforms has been on the operations of schools. The government is providing "evidence" that the schools are doing a very good job, because of reforms, while the principals are trying to show that the schools are finding it increasingly more difficult to do a good job, because of reforms.

A similar potential for the generation of conflicting evidence is revealed in Meeting the Challenge IV (Alberta Education, 1998) in which the Goals for Alberta's Education System are laid out in detail. As one example, Goal 4 states: *Teaching in Alberta consistently is of high quality*. The performance measures against which the achievement of this goal is to be assessed are as follows:

*Percentage of students who agree that teachers use a variety of approaches to meet their individual needs.

*Percentage of parents who are satisfied that teachers:

- use methods that help students learn,
- help students achieve learning expectations and high standards, and
- clearly communicate learning expectations for their child.

*Percentage of teachers receiving permanent certification who report:

- their teaching preparation program, and
- professional development while holding an interim certificate provided them with the competencies needed to help students learn.

*Percentage of principals who agree that teachers holding an interim certificate:

- know how to evaluate student needs and progress, and
- use results of their evaluation to improve student learning.

In determining the achievement of this goal, Alberta Education intends to place the greatest responsibility for assessment on the satisfaction first of students, then of parents, then of beginning teachers and, finally, in a very limited way, of principals who happen to be responsible for the evaluation of beginning teachers. The achievement of the seven other goals is to be assessed in generally similar ways, with very limited input expected from school boards (now being referred to increasingly as school authorities), superintendents, principals and teachers. Perhaps there is some consistency in the process, however, in that representatives of each of these groups of education stakeholders had limited say in the determination of the Ministry's eight goals for the system, lending some credibility to Conley's (1997) observation that today's educators in North America find themselves having to respond to an educational agenda being determined more and more by non-educators.

QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

The following tables show a comparison of responses of teachers, principals and superintendents to ten of the fourteen statements on the questionnaire.

Table 1. Alberta's educational reforms have led to an increase in accountability for teachers.

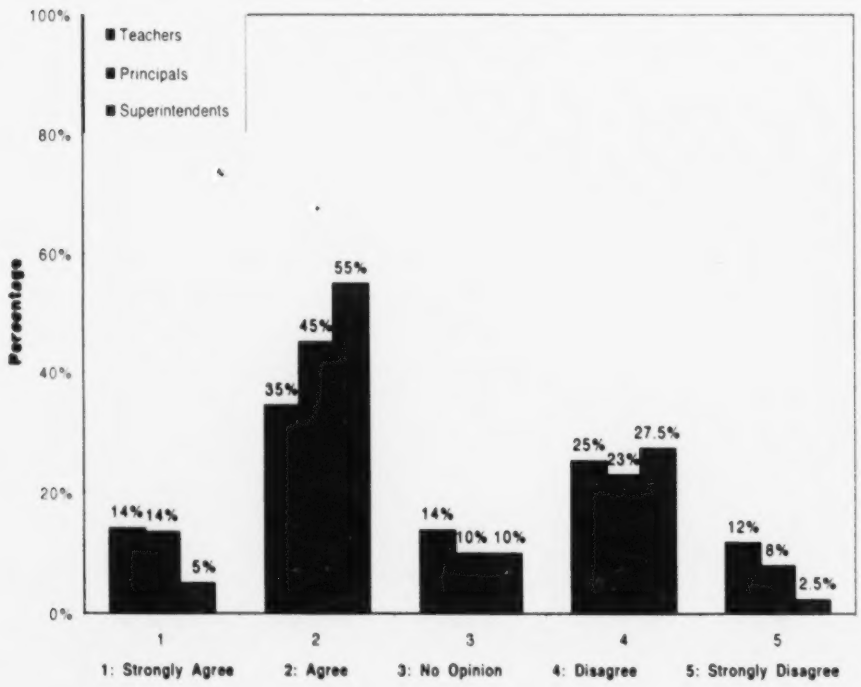

Table 1 shows that a majority of respondents in all three groups agreed with this statement. Many of them cited the new teacher evaluation policy and the increased attention being paid to student achievement test data as evidence of the impact of accountability measures. However, a substantial minority of respondents in each group disagreed with the statement. In explaining their disagreement, many of them took issue

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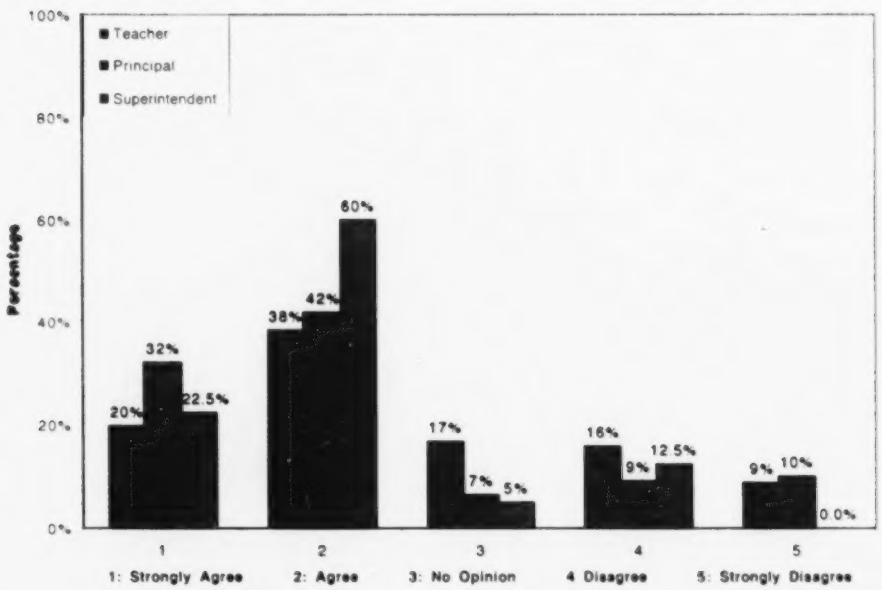
with the government's way of consulting with educators, with the measures themselves, and with the apparent assumption on the part of the government that increased accountability measures would ensure improved student learning. Teachers in particular were inclined to note that they did their jobs to the best of their ability no matter what the government did.

Table 2. Alberta's educational reforms have led to an increase in accountability for school principals.



The results in Table 2 show an even larger majority of each group agreed with the statement about accountability for principals. Even though in their responses many principals made references to the burden of additional paper work, additional meetings and the difficulties associated with the transition to site-based management, only 19% felt that the statement itself was incorrect. Most principals did not challenge the notion that accountability had increased for them; rather, their concern was that increased fiscal

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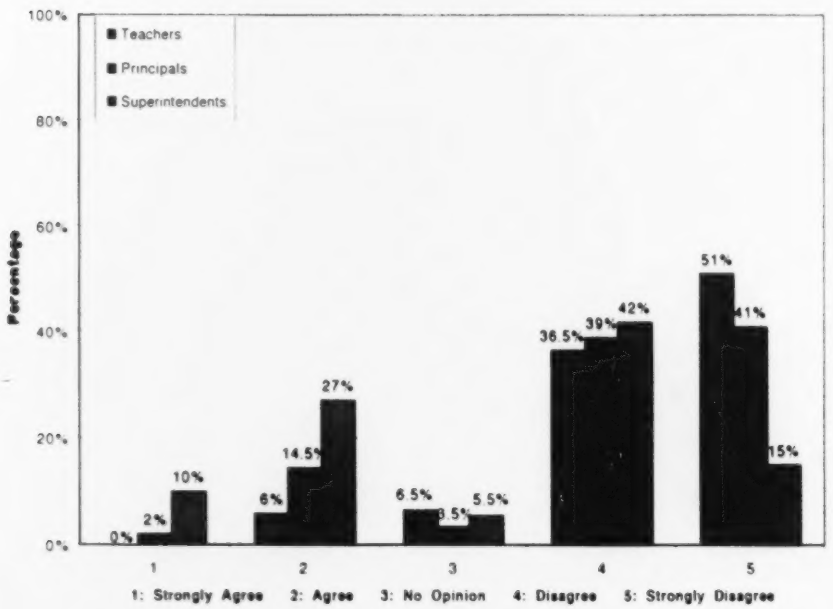
accountability was making it progressively more difficult for them to do their jobs well. Superintendents in particular agreed most strongly with the statement, often acknowledging a major concern of many principals that the process of downloading that has accompanied educational reform has added greatly to the workload of principals.

Table 3 Alberta's educational reforms have led to an improved equality of service being provided to Alberta's students.



A majority of superintendents (57%), a larger majority of principals (80%) and an even larger majority of teachers (87.5%) disagreed with this statement, which is based on one of the government's publicly-stated goals of restructuring. Provincial control of school taxation and the redistribution of funds on a per student basis was supposed to "level the playing field" for Alberta's school districts. The educators in this study were strongly convinced that this has not happened and they have raised the possibility that

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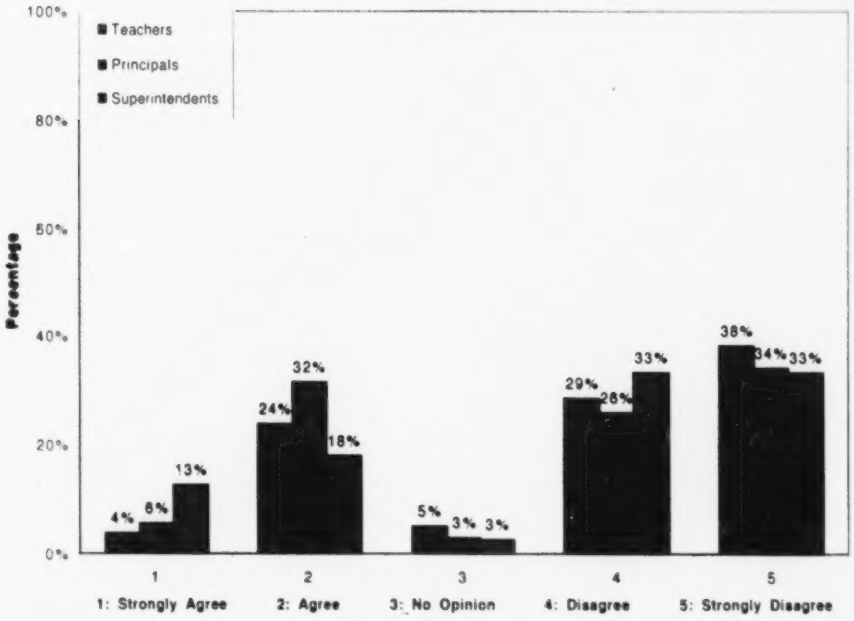
reform is having some serious unanticipated negative effects on some jurisdictions it was supposed to help.

Table 4 Alberta's educational reforms have led to increased local control over public education.



While there were many teachers, principals and superintendents who reported their agreement with this statement, a majority of respondents in each group disagreed with it. On the positive side, principals were more likely than superintendents or teachers to agree with this statement.

Of those greater numbers who disagreed, many expressed strong disagreement. The consistency of disagreement among groups suggests this issue of local control is a contentious one. It may be that the government's definition of local control is at odds with the experiences of many of these educators. One superintendent summed up the

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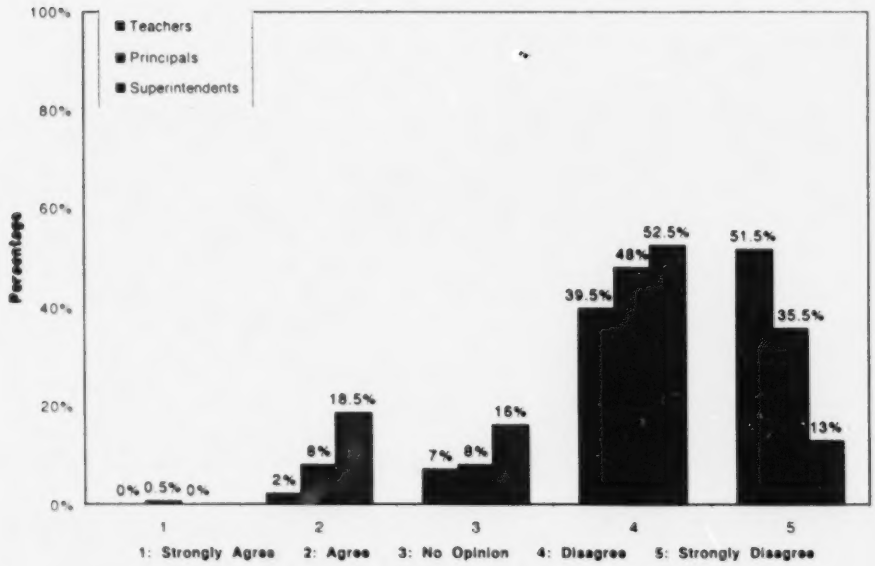
distinction in the following way: "With the centralization of taxation, responsibility is a local matter and accountability is a provincial one." Clearly, some school jurisdictions, principals and staffs have experienced some of the changes this reform was intended to foster but most have not.

Table 5 Alberta's educational reforms have brought about significant improvements in student learning.



The results displayed in Table 5 give some evidence of the degree to which educators in each group discount the existence of a connection between the implementation of Alberta's accountability measures and the quality of student learning. A commonly expressed sentiment from respondents in all groups was that most improvements in student learning have been the result of the best efforts of teachers and have occurred in spite of the effects of reforms, not because of them.

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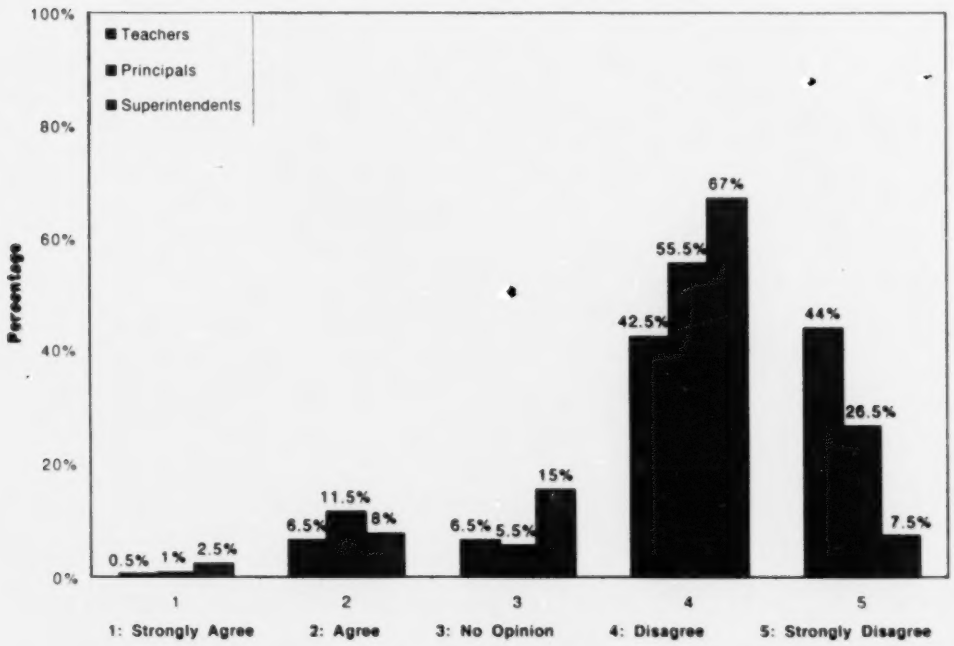
What stands out in this table is the consistency of disagreement across groups. While it might have been expected that most teachers would reject this statement, it was not so easy to anticipate that principals (83.5%) and superintendents (65.5%) would disagree in such high numbers.

Table 6. Alberta's educational reforms have brought about an overall improvement in classroom teaching practices.



The results in Table 6 show an even stronger level of disagreement in all three groups than that revealed in Table 5. Based on their written comments, which amplify their tabulated responses, it is apparent that the large majority of teachers were reluctant to attribute anything of much importance to the effects of reforms. As with the data in Table 5, however, principals and superintendents are suggesting that there is a strong and

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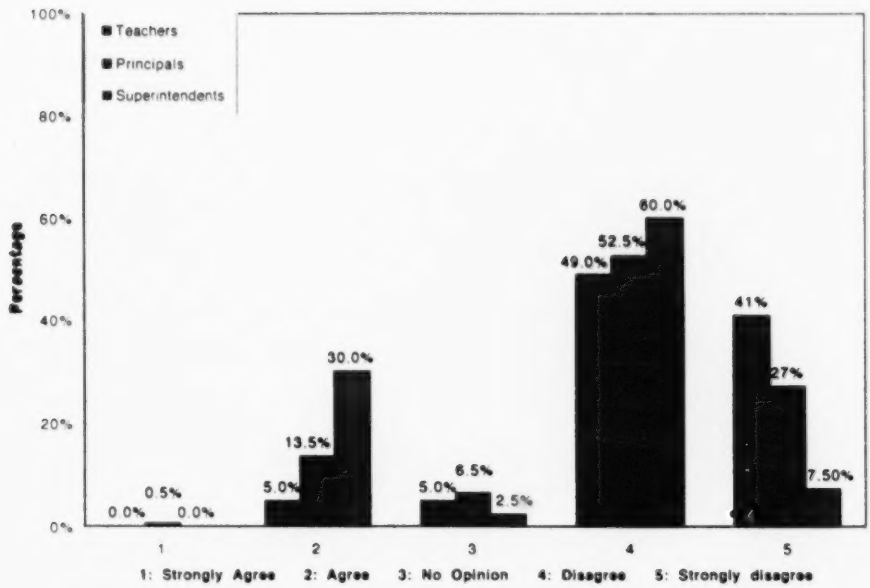
general sentiment among educators that challenges the assumption of a positive relationship between Alberta's accountability measures and classroom teaching practice. One explanation for these responses may be that the kinds of effects that would positively influence teaching practices take longer than four years to become apparent in the classroom but another explanation may be that the reforms that have been initiated are not of the type that can influence teaching practices in productive ways.

Table 7 Alberta's educational reforms have increased public confidence in the public education system.



This statement was created to compare the perceptions of educators with those of parents, high school students and members of the public at large whose phone survey responses were used in a Report on Key Performance Measures for Education

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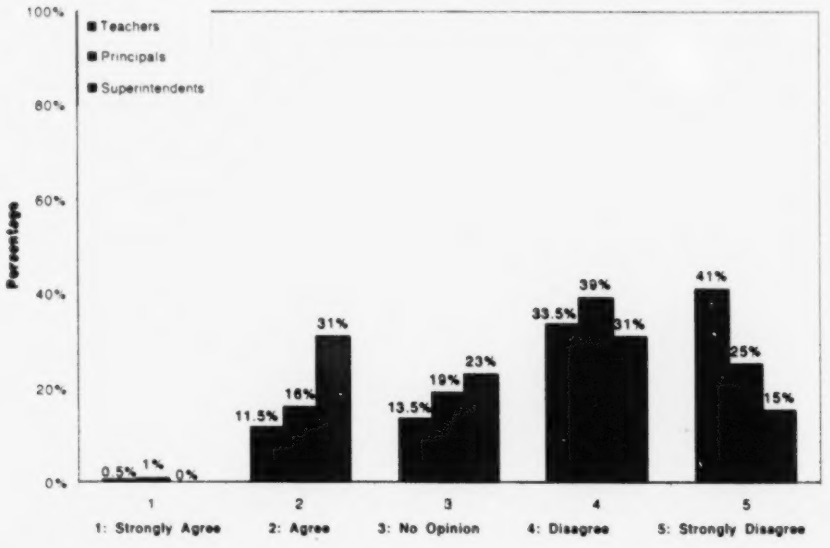
Accountability (Alberta Education, 1997). The implication of that report was that Albertan's levels of satisfaction with particular aspects of the public education system were very high.

Table 7 shows 90% of teachers, 77.5% of principals and 67.5% of superintendents disagreed with the statement. Conversely, superintendents (30%) were more inclined to acknowledge an increase in public confidence than were principals (14%) or teachers (5%) but it seems fair to conclude that a fairly large majority of the educators in this study either do not acknowledge any increase in public confidence, or do not attribute any gain in public confidence to the effects of reforms, or both.

Table 8 Alberta's educational reforms have resulted in a system that is run in accordance with the fundamental principles of democracy.



This statement was developed in consultation with representatives of school trustees following their annual convention in 1997. It produced some very strong

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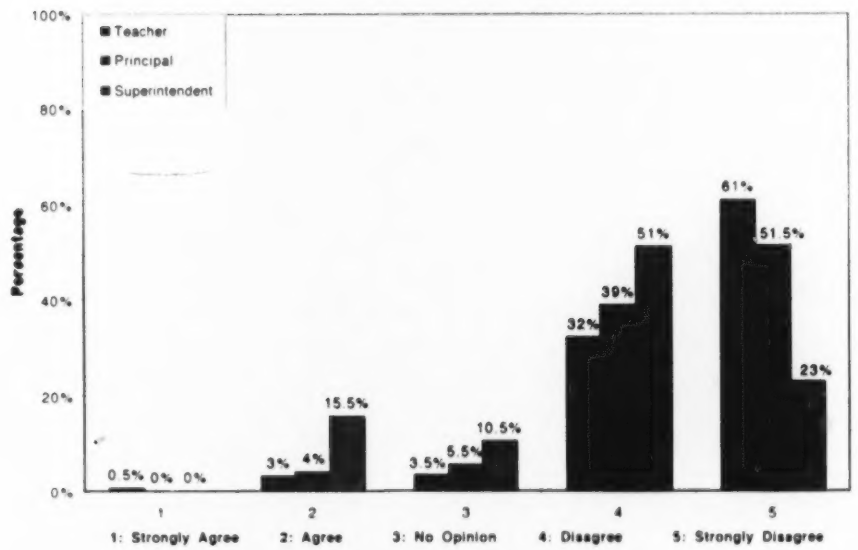
negative responses from all three groups, with 84.5% of teachers, 64% of principals and 46% of superintendents expressing degrees of disagreement. The strength of teacher disagreement is fairly consistent with the public positions teachers and their Alberta Teachers' Association representatives have taken in response to much of the government's reform agenda. Generally, Alberta's teachers have resented the government's way of implementing reforms and what they see as an anti-teacher bias in government policy and practice. Teachers collectively and publicly have challenged the government to stop treating them in "undemocratic" ways.

Perhaps it is because of the openly-political character of this statement that so many superintendents offered no opinion (23%), but the fact that many more superintendents (46%) and so many principals (64%) disagreed with this statement suggests that they, too, see reforms either as having failed to enhance democratic processes or as having broken faith with some important democratic principles. Superintendents did not offer much written commentary to support their responses to this statement. Of the 24 principals who added written statements most wrote about a loss of local autonomy, the centralization of power, the growing influence of special interest groups, or the failure of decision-makers to listen.

Table 9 Alberta's educational reforms have contributed to the highest quality of public education the province can realistically afford.



The statement in Table 9, like several others in each questionnaire, was drawn from a text published by Alberta Education, Meeting The Challenge IV, pp. 1-4), purporting to show the positive effects of educational reforms on the operations of the system. A majority of superintendents, teachers and principals did not agree with the Ministry's conclusions. Funding is a major issue for most front-line educators in Alberta and, in fact, it is probably the one issue around which most hostility and conflict has been generated between other educational stakeholders and the government. Overwhelmingly, the respondents to these questionnaires rejected the notion that funding is adequate and, in their written statements teachers, in much greater numbers than principals and superintendents, expressed alarm that the quality of the system is being eroded by the very initiatives the government claims are making it better. Of the more than 100 teacher

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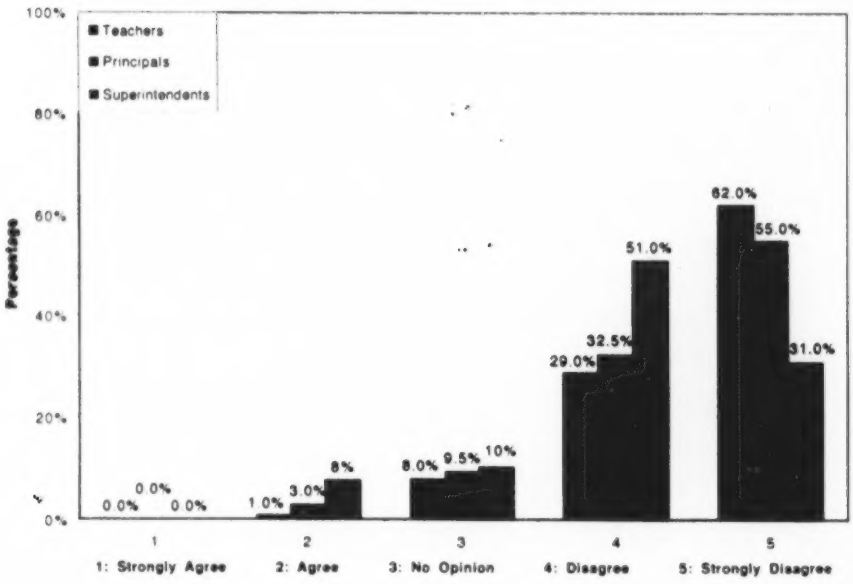
comments in response to this statement the following one best captures the anger and intensity this issue provokes:

> Ridiculous! The government told us they could not afford E.C.S. a couple [of] years ago. Now we're being told that "reinvestment" will help us provide better services to those students in grades 1-2 who can't read. They can't read because they didn't have the full benefit of E.C.S! The government also said that money was being redistributed through the system so that children would get more equitable educational services. If this is so, why is our school so dependent on fund-raising to keep our basic program going?

Table 10 Alberta's educational reforms have helped solve most of the problems that existed in the system prior to 1993.



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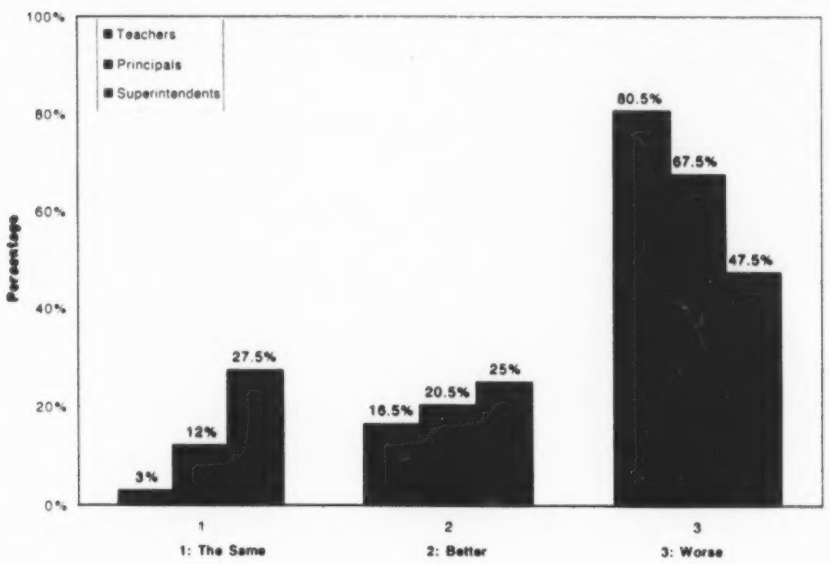
The results in Table 10 show the strength of disagreement expressed by all groups in their responses to this statement. For most of these educators, the problems that the system faced before the introduction of reforms are still those they must contend with today. According to many respondents, not only have reforms failed to correct existing problems, they have created additional ones, most notably in the areas of special needs, class size and staff morale.

Table 11 Compared with conditions in your jurisdiction in 1993, are overall conditions the same, better, or worse in 1998?



In addition to their responses to the fourteen statements, participants were asked to provide written responses to seven questions, the first of which appears in Table 11. A minority of teachers (16.5%), principals (20.5%) and superintendents (25%) felt that conditions in their jurisdictions were better in 1998 that they were in 1993. More than a

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quarter of the superintendents (27.5%) felt that conditions were the same, a point of view not shared to the same degree by principals (12%) or teachers (3%). A large majority of teachers (80.5%), a fairly large majority of principals (67.5%) and nearly half the superintendents (47.5%) felt that overall conditions were worse in 1998, nearly five years after reforms were initiated, than they were before the process started.

A second question asked participants to describe the overall state of public education in Alberta. As a group, the superintendents who answered this question were divided among those 10 who thought the system was working well, those 10 who were cautious and slightly pessimistic and the 18 whose responses ranged from negative to very negative. Typical of the comments of superintendents in the initial group were the following:

- Doing very well
- Excellent, but facing strain
- Much improved overall
- Going in the right direction
- High quality

Superintendents representative of the middle group used phrases such as "in the balance," "okay in the short term," "precarious," and "in a holding pattern" to describe their impressions of the overall state of public education. Negative commentary from the 18 superintendents in the third group ranged from criticisms of the government ("there is no vision for public education"; "the government is contemptuous of public education") to hints of frustration, warnings, and some despair, of which the following are fairly representative:

- Chaotic, confusing, messy
- Principals and teachers are valiantly trying to hold the system together
- Our grandchildren are in trouble
- We are nearing a crisis state
- In an extreme state of fragmentation and... confusion

Principals' responses to this question about the overall state of public education tended to be far less restrained than those of superintendents. Almost 70% of their answers were negative or critical, while approximately 20% were positive or supportive. By far the most frequently-used terms were "in decline," "in a state of chaos," "dismal," "deteriorating," "in crisis," and a number of variations of each of these. As well, many of the positive comments included pointed references to reasons why the system was doing well that gave credit to the efforts of teachers and others while downplaying the contribution of government and the reforms themselves. Typical of those types of statements were the following:

- [The system is] healthy only because of the dedication of teachers to succeed regardless of what they have to work with.
- As a whole the system may be all right but the former "have-not" districts are smiling while the former "have" districts are struggling along.
- The system seems to be surviving despite educational reforms but only because of the commitment of teachers, principals and school boards to make the best of a very difficult situation.

Just over 9% of the 301 teachers who answered this question felt that the overall state of the education system was good or better, but a lot of them suggested it was good

only because of the efforts of teachers or despite the effects of educational reforms. Many others wrote at length and with considerable passion in framing their negative responses to this question. Still others expressed great frustration, even hostility at the government for what they perceived to be examples of poor leadership, failed stewardship, or deliberate subversion.

The following statements are typical of the positive comments made by teachers, although they are not representative of relative quantity.

- Public education is functioning well
- Quite good
- Thanks to the teachers it's okay
- Public education is very strong because of its dedicated teachers
- Public schools in Alberta are doing a very good job of preparing students for the future
- Despite inadequate funding, public education is providing quality education to Alberta's students

Of the hundreds of negative statements submitted by teachers, the following have been selected as generally representative of tone and intent.

- Quality has been greatly reduced since I came here 15 years ago. One of the main reasons we settled in Alberta to raise a family was the quality of education. I feel my children have been cheated.
- Abysmal! I have seen the health of teachers affected, the morale of school staffs sink to unprecedented levels, and the quality of education deteriorate in the last five years.

- In disarray. We lack resources and textbooks. Teachers are angry and unhappy because we continue to give up our earnings but receive nothing back from the government or the public but lack of respect.
- Public education is held together by hard working teachers who refuse to compromise children's education in spite of mounting personal costs. They are doing way more with way less. There is a breaking point and, ultimately, all students will suffer. Many are suffering already.
- Like the fingernails of the dead, public education gives the impression that it lives on despite the cuts. The corporate body, however, is dead or, if not dead, emaciated and emasculated. A mortal blow has been dealt.
- Restrictive, narrow, focussed in one direction; left-brained, unbalanced . . . focussed only on success-driven achievement. Why would we want to be like [certain other] driven societies? Why emulate them? Why can't we be ourselves?
- We, as educators, are reaching a state of exhaustion. We are struggling to hold together our public education system without the support of our government and the general population.
- Threatened, disreputable, maligned, tattered. It takes advantage of the students who have the greatest needs, the parents who desperately believe in the value of education and the teachers who will continue to work beyond what anyone in private industry would expect from even the most loyal employee.
- In crisis. Never before have I had so many colleagues ready to [quit the profession]. We have propped up the system for 5 years and we're ready to give up.

- My children graduated in 1990 and 1994. They were lucky to get through school before [the system] started to erode. My son's Alberta education has helped him internationally but I fear for my grandchildren's education unless the public system is helped more.

In a comparative sense, superintendents offered the most cautious and the least critical comments overall. A large majority of principals were strongly critical of the current state of the public education system and, qualitatively, their comments were much more similar to those of teachers than those of superintendents. Very few teachers offered unqualified positive statements in their responses. Rather, the largest number of teacher comments were very critical of such things as the government, funding, and reforms while an almost-equal number raised concerns about class size, children with special needs, teacher morale and teacher health.

DISCUSSION

The perceptions and opinions recorded by representative samples of Alberta's superintendents, principals and teachers near the end of the 1997-98 school year give evidence of the unevenness of impact of educational reform, some indications of the degree to which intended goals appear to have been achieved, and some sense of the differences that exist between what Alberta Education says about the operations of the public education system and what representatives of front-line, middle management and senior management personnel in the system say is happening.

On the question of accountability, the government seems to have achieved its stated goal. Both principals and teachers see themselves and each other as being made more accountable as a direct result of certain reforms. Similarly, superintendents see teachers and principals as being more accountable, yet the question raised by so many respondents in this study is "Accountable for what?" For many teachers and principals, extra attention focussed on narrow measures of achievement, increased record-keeping and correspondence, the production of three-year business plans, and extra time devoted to matters of local governance do not necessarily translate into improved student learning and improved teaching practices. Moreover, the dimensions of accountability that have schools and parent groups chasing extra funds and cutting corners to provide the quality of educational service their students deserve are seen to have deleterious effects on long-term staff morale, professional commitment, student achievement and even staff health.

With respect to site-based management and school councils it appears that there are high levels of implementation and acceptance of these two additional elements of accountability and reorganization. Several principals wrote glowingly of the excellent

relationships they have with and the great support they receive from their school councils, and most are satisfied with their ability to manage their schools. Perhaps it is ironic that principals' increased concerns about what's happening with respect to funding in education derive at least in part from their increased knowledge about how directly funding affects their operations, knowledge that comes mainly from their having taken on the greater responsibility of site-based management.

Why were Alberta's educational reforms implemented when they were, and in the way they were? Part of the answer to these questions seems obvious. The government of the day was publicly committed to a course of action based on the catchphrase "Don't blink". It was seen as imperative that reforms be implemented quickly, before special interest groups had a chance to organize opposition that might water-down their real intent. From Alberta Education's point of view, the documents that eventually became the government's School Authorities Accountability Policy clearly gave the Ministry more effective ways of curtailing the bargaining power of the Alberta Teachers' Association (A.T.A.) and a way of exercising more centralized control over the operations of school boards, particularly those in the larger urban centres and those that were increasingly less able to resist the bargaining tactics of the A.T.A. Fiscal control and accountability were seen as necessary prerequisites to the improvements in teaching and learning that, it was assumed, would soon follow.

Have the reforms brought about improvements in the operations of the system? According to the educators in this study, only in superficial ways. Around this broad issue of the reasons why reforms were initiated, the targets of reforms and the effects of reforms, evidence is gathering. In particular, a majority of educators in each group see

reforms as having failed to foster equality of service to students across the system. Similar or larger majorities of each group of respondents do not agree that reforms are contributing to improved student learning, or improved teaching practices; nor do they believe that reforms have helped increase public confidence in public education. Moreover, they are not convinced that there has been any serious increase in local control, the perceived benefits of school councils and site-based management not-withstanding. On the contrary, many of them believe the measures that have promoted greater centralization of system operations are stronger and more influential than those that appear to encourage decentralization. In addition, on the issue of funding, a large majority of each group of respondents feels the government's contributions to public education are inadequate, while the statement dealing with reforms' success in solving problems that existed prior to 1993 generated higher levels of concurrence (unanimity of disagreement) and more pronounced extremes of disagreement than any other in the questionnaire.

This is not to suggest that all these representatives of Alberta's educators see the reforms as failing to promote needed change. A number of superintendents and principals are clearly enthusiastic about such things as the local governance elements of reform, the promotion of site-based management, school councils, shared decision-making at the local level and, in some cases, increased accountability for teachers and principals. In particular, at least eight superintendents declared themselves very pleased with their changed fortunes and improved circumstances. The following description of Regional School District A is a good example of what has happened in some jurisdictions as a direct result of restructuring:

Prior to amalgamation, Regional School District A had been two sparsely-populated rural districts. With amalgamation, certain staffing economies occurred, most obviously at the central office level. In effect, an entire central office staff was let go. Simultaneously, with the redistribution of property tax dollars, School District A experienced a dramatic increase in its per student funding. As a result, one central office staff and one school board were now able to offer expanded services to 18 schools, 3200 students and 155 teachers and, according to the superintendent, " . . . Things are going very well. This year [1997-98] we've been able to increase our district's commitment to the teachers' professional development fund and to principals' P.D. in really significant ways."

In yet another district, the superintendent sees educational reforms as contributing to an increase in authority and responsibility for principals. In his statement he added, "[These reforms are] helping us build a school system culture based on collaboration, respect for people, open communication and a desire to have all students experience success."

Among those superintendents who are not pleased with the effects of reforms are several who represent smaller urban areas. In their responses they identified the following factors as having a negative impact on operations in many established districts:

- A large majority of their teachers are at maximum salary.
- Their schools are in direct competition for students with other schools in other districts.
- They have more than the average number of students with special needs.
- They have schools in parts of the district with declining student populations.

- They are experiencing an overall decline in student population.
- They have had to close one or more schools in any given year.
- They have to build new schools.
- They have a number of schools that require extensive renovation.

Some disaffected superintendents have experienced difficulties brought on by enforced regionalization and a few others continue to have a problem reconciling their own beliefs about the value and purpose of public education with those of the government. As one senior superintendent wrote:

> Not a lot of this has impacted the classroom yet because we are all protecting students [but] the new accountability measures have brought everyone down to a lower level. When we have no control over change, and we are not involved in the decisions about change, we have no commitment to the change.

Another small city superintendent wrote, "We have always been known as a progressive district with high standards and high values. [Reforms have made us] a have-not system. Equality has not worked for us."

Alberta's principals, as they are represented by the participants in this study, are generally quite negative about the impact of educational reforms. Their concerns centre most consistently on three broad areas: what's happening to their students; what's happening to their staffs; and what's happening to them.

While most principals agree that reforms have led to increased accountability for them and for teachers, most are not convinced reforms will lead, in turn, to a better system. Most principals see themselves and their teachers as working harder than ever in their restructured schools and many of them are more likely to attribute any improvement in student outcomes, any greater productivity, or any overall improvements in their school or their system to the industry, dedication and commitment of professional staff

rather than anything the government has initiated. Thirty-eight principals (19%) made this distinction in their written responses. It is instructive to compare the conclusions of the principals in this study with those of principals in 1996 (see Townsend, Penton, Aitken and Gowans, 1997). Then, 53% of principals thought the overall quality of Alberta schools was worse in 1996 than it was before reforms began in 1992. In this more recent study, 67.5% of principals felt that overall conditions in their jurisdictions were worse in 1998 than they were in 1993.

Many principals from the Edmonton district identified themselves in their responses, most often to explain that their system has used a site-based management model with great success for many years. Most of these principals were pleased that the government had initiated local governance reforms province-wide, although four Edmonton principals indicated that funding cuts were preventing them from operating their schools as effectively as they had in previous years.

Most principals' statements about students centred on those with special needs. There is very broad agreement among the principals in this study that funding for special needs students is seriously inadequate. Mentioned almost as frequently by principals was the issue of class size. It needs to be noted that some principals gave no evidence at all of being worried about this matter but many did indicate their concern about increasing class size, often in conjunction with statements about integration or mainstreaming of special needs students, or with reference to a perceived increase in the numbers of behaviorally-difficult students for whom no special funding is available. One principal wrote, "Integration with smaller classes can work well. Integration with classes over 25 is frustrating for all concerned." On the same point another principal noted, "We now

have less staff, bigger classes, and more children with more demanding educational needs than we have ever had. But despite all the government's efforts to make us look bad, morale in our school is good!"

With respect to staff, many principals expressed concern that their teachers were working too hard to overcome obstacles that had been placed in their way by government cutbacks and by the government's public attitude toward them. Most of the principals in this study had high praise for the hard work and dedication of their teachers. That sentiment is fairly captured in the following principal comments:

- Of course our teachers are stressed. Public education has been spit upon and dragged through the mud and the government has done absolutely nothing to defend it. [In fact, they] are helping to dismantle the public system [but] our teachers still do a great job!
- We have an outstanding, dedicated staff who work their hearts out to help every student. They truly care! We are all tired of hearing everything that's wrong with public education. In our school we are providing a quality education to all students despite reduced funding.
- My teachers are overworked, overstressed, underpaid and underappreciated by the government and the public.

Apart from the work of their teachers, principals were most likely to cite the following as sources of satisfaction or as evidence of success in their own work:

- Positive relations with school councils. Many principals made a particular point of noting that their school councils were either effective, successful, supportive or in other ways making a positive contribution to the success of the school.

- The sense of greater control fostered by site-based management
- The extra assistance provided by fundraising ventures
- Positive student achievement

The preceding list is not a long one. Positive comments were few and far between in the principals' responses. Conversely, there was a much greater concentration of specific concerns in the principals' written responses. Those most frequently mentioned were as follows:

- The negative effects of inadequate funding
- Paper overload
- The enforced transition from instructional leader to manager
- The preoccupation with dollars and cents
- The negativity of the provincial government
- Frustration over strategies used by the government in the implementation of reforms.

In addition, many principals recorded their worries over government policy regarding uses of technology in schools and their concerns about building maintenance. With respect to the former, principals expressed considerable frustration that heavy expenditures in new technology were, in effect, being mandated by the government at the same time that financial cutbacks were having their most serious impact. With respect to the latter, principals noted frequently their inclinations to delay decisions about building maintenance in favor of decisions that provided resources more directly to students in classrooms.

Finally, many principals of small schools observed that funding cutbacks were hurting them disproportionately. The following selected statements give evidence of the extent and character of their concerns (school size is indicated in brackets):

- (135 students) We had a 30% cut in our operating budgets. We no longer have enough staff to deliver a full program.
- (122 students) We have been forced to drop some excellent programs in order to balance the budget. We cut staff because in a small school that's really the only place to save any dollars.
- (number of students not given) We do not have enough staff to cover mandated elements of the Program of Studies.
- (75 students) The reforms are destroying small schools.
- (195 students) Lack of funding is seriously affecting programs. Home Economics and Shop classes have been closed. Fund-raising is a necessity. We subsidize many families that cannot afford such things as the swim program.
- (257 students) In smaller schools we cannot keep up with the demands of technology [and] budget cuts have impeded our assistance to children with special needs.
- (160 students) We are solvent only because of vigorous school-based fundraising. Without it we would be in a difficult position.
- (320 students) We are bankrupt. In order to subsidize smaller classes in Career and Technology Studies, French and Math 31 we will have many core classes with 35 students in them. Custodial hours have been cut by 30% and we will have to

eliminate some extra-curricular programs that draw off fundraising so we can use "fund-raised" money to support core programs.

- (325) We will begin an annual rite this year—deficit budgeting. Everything that can be downloaded has been downloaded. Now we cannot meet the public's expectations or the educational expectations of our job because the reality for us is this year we will receive less revenue than we received last year to do the same job.
- (68 students) Our school will stay open next year only because the parents have promised to raise $18,000. In our small community, that's a lot of money.
- (380 students) We are kept afloat by community fundraising, casinos, and increased school fees.
- (170 students) We are $150,000 short for next year. We have three classes of combined grades already and a similar number of students next year with fewer staff. My school does not have enough revenue to run the basic program properly.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide some indications of the range and depth of Alberta educators' feelings about, and levels of awareness of, the impact of educational reform on the operations of the public education system. Collectively, a majority of superintendents, principals and teachers do not agree that reforms have improved the system and, on several key points, their strength of disagreement is compelling. These educators are representative of the 27 000 teachers, 1 800 principals and 65 superintendents who provide the professional expertise that is at the heart of public education in Alberta. They know of what they speak. Only they see the system at work on a daily basis in the most immediate and intimate ways. It should be apparent that their voices will have to be heard and their concerns addressed before any kind of reform initiative is to have any lasting positive effect on the quality of teaching and learning in Alberta's schools.

Policy-makers in Alberta must decide what to do with this growing evidence of reforms' diminished achievements. According to a majority of educators in the field, small schools are in trouble, equality of educational opportunity remains unattained, and fiscal economies have been achieved at considerable collateral cost, while a strategy of ignoring the expertise of educators and the lessons of others' experiences may be contributing to the exacerbation of the very conditions reforms were intended to rectify. Peter Senge (1990) has said that today's problems are too often the direct result of yesterday's solutions. The findings of this study challenge the stewards of Alberta's education system to reconsider their accomplishments and their intentions in the light of this new evidence and be guided by reason rather than ideology in charting a new course

for public education, one that is driven by the collective energy of all stakeholders towards goals that are honoured and valued by all Albertans, particularly those who must work hardest to ensure those goals are achieved.

The public education system may be in crisis but, if it is, an intensification of remedial strategies that have already been shown to have limited utility will not move it towards greater effectiveness. Moreover, solutions to many of the problems that challenge the system are less likely to be found if the wisdom, skill and energy of its educators cannot be harnessed to the task of making Alberta's public education system the best it can be.

In the current context of adversarial relationships and mistrust, valuable resources are being wasted in the pursuit of goals of dubious value and in the defence of principles and positions, the preservation of which does nothing to improve the quality of education. The message from the educators in this study is clear. New relationships must be formed, new goals must be agreed upon and a new spirit of cooperation must come to characterize the work of all those who believe that a healthy and effective public education system is fundamental to a strong Alberta.

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APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE: 1998

Title: THE IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL REFORMS ON THE OPERATIONS OF ALBERTA'S PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

Note: This study, supported by the *Centre for Assessment Research and Evaluation* at The University of Lethbridge, is being conducted throughout Alberta from October, 1997 to May, 1998. A preliminary report will be available in July, 1998.

Respondent: ❑ Superintendent ❑ Principal ❑ Teacher

Jurisdiction: a) Number of Schools ____ b) Number of Teachers ____

c) Number of Students ____

Years of Experience _____ Gender ___ F. ___ M.

Please circle the number that most closely approximates your level of response. Comments are greatly appreciated!!! Feel free to use the back of the sheet if there is not enough room.

Alberta's Educational Reforms Have:	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**No Opinion**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
1. led to an increase in accountability for teachers. Comments: _____	1	2	3	4	5
2. led to an increase in accountability for school principals. Comments:	1	2	3	4	5
3. led to an improved equality of of service being provided to Alberta's students. Comments: _____	1	2	3	4	5
4. increased local control over public education. Comments: _____	1	2	3	4	5
5. brought about significant improvements in student learning. Comments: _____	1	2	3	4	5
6. brought about an overall improvement in classroom teaching practices. Comments: _____	1	2	3	4	5
7. increased public confidence in the public education system. Comments: _____	1	2	3	4	5

8. resulted in a system that is run in accordance with the fundamental principles of democracy. 1 2 3 4 5
Comments: _____

9. contributed to the highest quality of public education the province can realistically afford. 1 2 3 4 5
Comments: _____

10. helped solve most of the problems that existed in the system prior to 1993. 1 2 3 4 5
Comments: _____

PART B In as few or as many words as you like, please respond to the following questions.

1. How would you describe the overall state of public education in Alberta?

_____

_____

2. Compared with conditions in your jurisdiction in 1993, are overall conditions the same, better, or worse in 1998? _____ Please comment on any outstanding issues.

_____

_____

3. How would you describe the effectiveness of school councils in your jurisdiction?

_____

_____

4. How would you describe the impact of site-based management in your jurisdiction?

_____

_____

5. How would you describe teacher morale in your school jurisdiction?

_____

_____